

ECRH Notes

Ecumenical Center for Religion and Health, San Antonio, TX

September 11, 2001

Listening to Cries for Help: The Stages of Grief

Many people you know may have been or will be negatively impacted by the recent tragedy in New York City and Washington. They may have been traveling on business or perhaps live in the areas directly impacted. They may have children, parents or friends who have experienced the tragedy first hand. Perhaps they are police, fire or military personnel who have been dispatched and now return home exhausted and shaken. They may also be our elderly or others, who in their daily isolation have no one to talk with about what they have observed. One of the most prevalent reactions to tragedy is grief. Unfortunately most grief is not recognized and not responded to in a beneficial manner.

Persons impacted by disasters will exhibit many of the following symptoms of grief, and they will express their

"The disaster victim who maintains there is really nothing wrong at all and that he or she is 'perfectly o.k.' may in fact be experiencing grief."

losses in many different ways. They will also work through their grief at varying paces.

Elements of grief most apparent in

disaster include the following:

Denial

The disaster victim who maintains there is really nothing wrong at all and that he or she is "perfectly o.k." may in fact be experiencing grief. One should not take overly optimistic assessments of loss at face value, for they may be denial mechanisms. Indeed, many persons will not actively seek help after a disaster precisely because denial is at work. Many of those who eventually "fall through the cracks" and do not receive the help they require do so because by the time they emerge from denial the relief agencies are shutting down their work and the help is no longer available.

Anger

Anger is frequently encountered following a disaster, and it generally represents a stage in the grief process. As in other instances of grief, the anger may be generalized, and simply directed against anything and anyone. Anger may also be specifically directed at relief agencies and workers - the government, the Red Cross, the church. Understanding that anger is not a personal attack but is an expression of grief, can allow people to express their anger, come to terms with it, and work through this phase of grief.

Depression

Depression can be a serious symptom of grief, and should be carefully noted

when recognized in a disaster. Mental health referrals may need to be made. Sudden changes in personal response should be noted: the victim who (in the denial stage) was cheerful and eager to help others may suddenly become quiet

Many of those who eventually 'fall through the cracks' and do not receive the help they require do so because by the time they emerge from denial the relief agencies are shutting down and the help is no longer available."

and listless. Similarly, the first waving anger that characterized a victim's last visit to the relief center may now change to 'what's the use.' All of these are signs of depression.

"As the recovery phase moves along, you can be sure depression will be present. Aside from the obvious serious side effects, it most frequently leads to a general passivity and dependence.

Acceptance

Acceptance is the end stage of the grief process. It is characterized by an attitude that frankly acknowledges the extent of loss, accepts the limitations that has imposed, and looks toward whatever recovery is possible. ☘

Dear Friends,

Two things we know about disasters. First, grief will be present and needs to receive response. Second, it is helpful to remember that recovery from a disaster is like running a marathon, not a wind sprint. The information on these two pages is offered to help you and those you know and love during this difficult time.

Paul A. Parks, D.Min., Executive Director

Long Term Disaster Response

Following are excerpts from Inter-Lutheran Disaster Response materials regarding long term disaster response by the religious community.

Physical Needs: During the long-term phase, recovery continues to plod along slowly and hesitantly. Where people have tried to use their own resources for recovery, some find that they have come up short. Emergency needs for food and shelter can emerge far into the long-term phase. Living arrangements during the long rebuilding process are almost always sub-standard. The religious community can provide emergency assistance long after other agencies have concluded that there are no more unmet needs.

Emotional Needs: Loneliness becomes a major source of suffering. Around the community, it appears that others are doing more and recovering quicker. Despite the great need to talk about their frustrations, people discover that their neighbors and friends are either so heavily involved in their own pain that they have no time to listen, or are tired of hearing about the trouble. Support groups and counseling can help to break down this illusion of isolation.

The whole community feels isolated and unloved. Many of the agencies which were so visible in the immediate and short-term phases have now gone home and are far more difficult to contact. The media is also no longer interested. People feel like outcasts, needy but unloved. The religious community needs to assure people that they will continue to share love through the recovery.

Economic Needs: No matter how many relief agencies are in the area, some people will have unmet needs, due to policy restrictions, lost opportunities, inability to deal with complex

bureaucratic red tape, or mental exhaustion. There will always be some people who need the economic "safety net," provided by the religious community. Very often these needs do not appear until many of the other agencies have left the area.

"One positive result of the recent flood disaster is the increased awareness in our community regarding disaster response."

Social Needs: Ethnic communities, disabled persons, the elderly, homeless persons, unemployed and underemployed persons, non-English speaking people, undocumented persons, and others are generally underserved and neglected by policy-oriented agencies, which are designed many times to serve a basically Anglo, middle-class family which owns their home and has an ability to follow a bureaucratic process. Special concern and attention can be given by the religious community to these persons with complex needs and little access to the recovery process. Recovery requires persistence, consistent attention to details, and communication with the helping agencies.

Spiritual Needs: Questions of life and death, good and evil, God's love and God's wrath, will arise. Worship is an important opportunity for a disaster community, focusing on the assurance of God's love and care. The most helpful worship experiences seem to be those which provide both a familiar structure and individual sharing. Special study classes have been helpful to discuss the spiritual questions in depth. During the long-term phase, people need strength for perseverance

For help or information...

you may contact any of the ECRH Counseling staff at (210) 616-0885, for assistance to you or members of your congregation during this time of need. Staff counselors are available for consultation or counseling, for individuals, couples and families.

Fee subsidy is available.

Clinical Staff

Royce Calhoun, Ph.D.
Homer Bain, Ph.D.
Helen Stensrud, M.A., L.P.C.
Kay Watt, M.A.P.M., L.P.C.
Lucia Carter, M.A.
Daniel Thompson, Ph.D.
Randy Lyle, Ph.D.
Charles McDaniels, M.A.
Christine Lopez Ariza, M.A.

They need opportunities to celebrate the progress. And they need opportunities as well to call on God and God's people for help. As the disaster fades for some people, it brings more pain to others. Every person has a unique schedule of grief. Worship is time to be reminded about reality - the reality of human suffering. There are many opportunities for the message of reconciliation, healing and wholeness."

The Ecumenical Center For Religion and Health "Healing and Growth Through Knowledge and Faith"

***Counseling Services for Individuals, Couples and Families
Pastoral Education to Strengthen Ministers and Congregations***

***8310 Ewing Halsell Drive at Wurzbach
San Antonio, Texas, 78229***

***PH: 210-616-0885
Fax: 210-616-0845***

Website: www.ecrh.org